

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Chukkas

### The Death of Miriam and the Episode of Mei Meriva

#### INTRODUCTION

Among the most well-known and consequential episodes in our parsha is that of *Mei Meriva* – the waters of contention, commonly referred to as the episode of the hitting of the rock. Before we come to discuss the episode itself, let us take a look at its background – the death of Miriam. The well which accompanied the Jewish people in the wilderness and provided water for them did so in Miriam’s merit, so that when she died, the people found themselves without water; hence they complained to Moshe and the episode of *Mei Meriva* ensued.

#### KORBANOS AND THE PASSING OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Interestingly, Rashi’s first comment regarding the death of Miriam relates, not to the events which followed on from it, but to the section that preceded it: the parsha of *parah adumah* (the red heifer). Citing the Gemara,<sup>1</sup> Rashi writes:

*Why was the section of Miriam’s death juxtaposed with the section of the parah adumah? To teach you that in the same way that korbanos bring atonement, so, too, the death of the righteous brings atonement.*

To the above idea that the passing of the righteous brings about atonement, certain commentators add a proviso: This is only true if those who remain mourn the loss of that righteous person. If there is no such reaction, however, no atonement will occur, for it is not something that simply happens automatically when a righteous person dies.<sup>2</sup>

To understand this qualification a little deeper, let us consider the concept of atonement. The Hebrew word for atonement is “*kaparah*,” which means to wipe away. Atonement occurs when a person disassociates themselves from their wrongdoings, relating to them as something extrinsic to their essence and core values which can then be wiped away. Atonement is effectively a process of self-definition. The passing of a righteous person is a defining moment for those who remain. Not all of our actions on an ongoing basis reflect our innermost values; however, a feeling of loss when someone whose life and deeds did indeed embody those values says something about who we really are and what is important to us. That is why the atonement upon the passing of such a person is dependent on a feeling of mourning, for it is *what that feeling says about us* which makes atonement possible.

1 Moed Katan 28a.

2 See e.g. R’ David Pardo, *Maskil le’David* and *Torah Temimah* to our verse.

### **BETWEEN SPEAKING TO THE ROCK AND STRIKING IT**

Coming now to the episode of Mei Meriva itself, surely the most mystifying point is that the Torah does specify exactly what Moshe's sin was. The most widely-known approach is that it was that he hit the rock instead of speaking to it. There a number of basic questions that need to be considered regarding this approach:

1. What is the *actual difference* between drawing water from the rock through speaking to it, as opposed to hitting it? Surely both are miracles of basically equivalent caliber!
2. Whatever the difference between those two methods is, how are we understand what led Moshe to hit the rock instead of speaking to it?
3. In verse 8, Hashem tells Moshe to take his staff and assemble the people in front of the rock. Why should Moshe be *told to take his staff* if he is specifically not meant to use it?
4. In Verse 12, Hashem introduces His punishment to Moshe and Aharon with the words: "עַן לֹא הֵאֱמַנְתֶּם בִּי" – since you did not believe in Me." While hitting the rock instead of speaking to it was clearly a deviation from Hashem's instructions, how did it represent a lack of belief in Him?

Rashi<sup>3</sup> explains the difference between speaking to the rock and hitting it as follows:

*Had you spoken to the rock and it had given forth [water], I would have been sanctified before the eyes of the congregation, [for] they would have said, "If a rock that neither speaks nor hears nor has need of a livelihood fulfills the will of the Omnipresent, then all the more so should we."*

It emerges that, according to Rashi, the preference of speaking the rock as opposed to hitting it lies not in the fact that it is a higher miracle per se, but because it would have yielded an accompanying message that would inspire the people to enhance their mitzvah observance. However, this only deepens the question, for now we ask: Why would Moshe deviate from Hashem's instruction to speak to the rock, thereby foregoing the opportunity to impart a lesson to the Jewish people regarding the observance of mitzvos?

### **MOSHE'S DECISION TO STRIKE THE ROCK**

The commentators explain that the question of whether Moshe speaking to the rock would generate a positive outcome was dependent on the spiritual level of the Jewish people on that occasion. This is for two reasons:

1. It is possible that the higher level of miracle, whereby water would come out based on speech alone, was contingent on the people being on a level which would allow for such a miracle to take place.<sup>4</sup>
2. Only if the people were on a high level would they be mindful to draw the moral lesson represented by the rock responding to Hashem's word; if not, then that lesson would go unnoticed.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, depending on the level of the people, speaking to the rock could either bring about a positive result or a negative – even disastrous – one! If their level is deficient, such that

---

3 Verse 12, s.v. *le'hakdisheni*.

4 Alshich HaKadosh, Parshas Chukkas.

5 R' Meir Shapiro, *Imrei Daas Parshas Chukkas*.

speaking to the rock does not produce water, then that would lead to a *profanation* of Hashem's name. Similarly, if their level is such that they do not learn the relevant lesson from the rock heeding Hashem's word, this would actually lead to an *indictment* of them for failing to heed that message.

What this means is that, in the event, it may be advisable to forego engaging in the higher form of miracle and simply extract water from the rock through hitting it. Indeed, many commentators point out that it is specifically for this reason Moshe was told to take the staff with him – to be prepared for just such a contingency.<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, then, the situation boils down to Moshe's assessment of the people as he was about to bring forth water. This is the meaning of his addressing them as "מורים – rebels," prior to hitting the rock. In other words, Moshe felt that they were in a rebellious state such as would not allow for the water to come forth through speech alone. Additionally, the simple meaning of the word "מורים" is teachers, not in itself a particularly negative thing, unless those in question should at that time be students, in which case they will miss out on lessons that he should be learning. In light of this assessment, Moshe judged that it was better to shift toward the lower and "safer" level of miracle, and hit the rock. In other words, Moshe's decision was ultimately motivated by a desire to protect Hashem's name from potential degradation and the Jewish people from potential indictment.

### **A MATTER OF TRUST**

Having attained some understanding of what prompted Moshe's decision to hit the rock, we return to the fact that, all of this notwithstanding, it was considered to be a mistake. Now we can understand why Hashem's censure of Moshe began with the words "Since you did not believe in Me." How was Moshe hitting the rock an expression of lack of faith in Hashem? We can now see how Moshe's decision represented a lack of faith regarding what Hashem was telling him *about the Jewish people*. Although Moshe was told to take the staff to be used if necessary, nevertheless, Hashem's instructions to him *as things stood* were to speak to the rock. In other words, Hashem was assuring Moshe that in spite of how rebellious and unruly the people appeared, they were nonetheless on a level which would allow for a positive outcome to occur from him speaking to the rock. In the event, the persistent contentiousness on the part of the people as the time for the miracle approached caused Moshe to waver on this point and to conclude that hitting the rock was the necessary path.

Actually, there is a further element here. In seeking to determine the level of the people at that time, so as to know which form of miracle was appropriate for them, something that would shed much light on the situation will be their response to an event which had occurred earlier on that very day – the passing of Miriam.

### **MOURNING VS. COMPLAINING**

As we mentioned in the beginning of this discussion, from the juxtaposition of Miriam's death with the parah adumah we learn that the passing of a righteous person brings about atonement. If the lesson of this avenue of atonement is taught through the death of Miriam, we must assume that it was effective at that time. Yet, as we also discussed, the atonement that comes with the passing of a righteous person is contingent on those who remain mourning their loss, as this serves to

---

6 See e.g. Targum Yonasan ben Uziel to verse 8.

define where they stand in terms of the departed person's values. If so, then we have to assume that the nation's reaction to Miriam's death was one of mourning. The problem is, a look at the ensuing verses doesn't seem to give that impression at all. There are no words at all of any grief or mourning expressed. Rather, the people come straight to Moshe and basically say, "Now what are we meant to drink? Did you take us out so that we should just die in the desert"? As eulogies go, that leaves a good deal to be desired!

The people's appalling reaction to Miriam's death was thus a clear reflection of their own deficient spiritual standing. The total lack of any words of appreciation or condolences regarding Miriam convinced Moshe that they were not on a level for the higher miracle to be advisable – or even possible, therefore, he hit the rock.

Wherein, then, lay Moshe's mistake, to the extent that we can understand it? Apparently, by telling Moshe to speak to the rock as the desired option, Hashem was telling him that in spite of the fact that all he is hearing from the people were words of complaint, nonetheless, deep down they *were* mourning the loss of Miriam. Perhaps their sense of loss was repressed due to the urgent need for water; indeed, perhaps it was expressed in their acrimonious words of complaint themselves. Either way, this is why the mistake of hitting the rock is expressed as a matter of lack of faith. Ultimately, what was demanded of Moshe was to approach a people who were doing nothing more than provoking and complaining and believe that they were in fact grieving.

### **WHY WAS AHARON ALSO PUNISHED?**

Moreover, this will also explain a most puzzling element within this whole episode, for not only Moshe was punished for hitting the rock, but Aharon too, was not allowed to enter the land. Why should Aharon be held accountable for Moshe's action?

Apparently, Aharon should have objected to Moshe's decision to hit the rock and somehow prevented him from doing so. In terms of our discussion, we can understand that this means that Aharon should have discerned that the people's abrasive manner did not reflect their true standing or level. In this regard, Aharon specifically was expected to have noticed this, as his particular specialty, mentioned in Pirkei Avos,<sup>7</sup> was that of "loving all creatures and bringing them close to Torah." The basis of bringing people close to Torah is the notion that their external actions do not always reflect their inner essence. In this regard, Aharon, too, was found wanting.

This then, is where Moshe and Aharon were considered to be at fault. They knew there was a fallback option of hitting the rock if need be, and moreover, everything they were hearing sounded like the situation required moving toward that option, with not word of appreciation over the loss of Miriam – their sister – to be heard. And yet, they were faulted for allowing all that to incline them toward taking that second option. All of this should give us some inkling into the level that was demanded of Moshe and Aharon on that occasion, as it was on all occasions.

---

7. 1:12